Fuse Theater Feature: Best Stage Productions of 2015

Fuse theater critics pick some of the outstanding productions of the year.
By The Arts Fuse Staff
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List of – Ian Thal

Any “best-of” list is going to be idiosyncratic — it is as much a reflection of what the critic had time to see as it is of the critic’s tastes. It is entirely possible that I did not see something that I would have loved. Boston boasts a lot of theatrical talent. But this gathering is not a compendium of “the good.” The productions are on this list because they transcended expectations: they had that alchemy that happens when every element (acting, directing, costuming, script, etc) combines into something greater.

*God’s Ear* by Jenny Schwartz. Directed by Thomas Derrah. Presented by Actors’ Shakespeare Project

Actor’s Shakespeare Project has had a remarkable 2015 (if I were making a list of honorable mentions, they’d rate at least a couple of entries). But who would have expected that the group’s most notable production would not be a play penned by their august namesake, but a contemporary work? Jenny Schwartz’s poetic script revolves around a family mourning the accidental death of a child. It addresses language’s inability to adequately express grief. The mother, father, and sister grieve alone and also in the company of barflies, a “transvestite air stewardess,” the tooth fairy, and a GI Joe action figure. It is not surprising that the superb actor Thomas Derrah would be able to draw out excellent performances from his cast. What was striking is that Derrah was also visually and choreographically inventive. Edward Young’s musical settings for Schwartz’s lyrics turned out to be the kind of top-notch avant-pop that I’d love to hear again and again.

*Ulysses On Bottles* by Gilad Evron. Translated by Evan Fallenberg. Directed by Guy Ben-Aharon. Presented by Israeli Stage and Arts Emerson

Israeli Stage has mostly focused on staged readings, which is how I first encountered Gilad Evron’s play in 2012. I was particularly pleased when artistic director Guy Ben-Aharon announced this would be their first full production, a decision I’d like to think my lobbying influenced. Ulysses is an Arab-Israeli citizen and former literature teacher who is arrested trying to sail to Gaza on a raft of his own devising. He has been possessed by the quixotic notion that the spiritual emptiness of the Palestinians can only be filled by an encounter with classic Russian literature. This absurd act is the inspiration for a profound political tragedy: Ulysses’ attorney, even as he fights to gain his client’s release, knows that granting Ulysses the freedom to pursue his quest may lead to his death. Ulysses’ story overlaps with the quandary of a member of Israel’s security establishment, who realizes that no matter how well he ensures that the blockade of Hamas-ruled Gaza accords with international humanitarian law, peace and security will remain an illusion. Ben-Aharon opted for a minimalist production; he put his efforts into putting across the script’s language and the performances of his all-star
cast. This is the best kind of political drama: audiences across the ideological spectrum will find something here that might antagonize them or force them to question their beliefs.


As much as I love a good comedy, I rarely laugh in my role as a reviewer. Yet watching this staged reading I caught myself cackling, chortling, and giggling at this four hander about a bored, childless couple who lure the downstairs neighbors into their lair in order to regale them with tales about their fascinating bohemian pursuits. Then they decide to scandalize the visitors with a verbal assault on every platitude that buoys bourgeois normality. Theresia Walser has already won favor with this critic as a wicked political satirist, but when she collaborates with her husband, the playwright, novelist, and essayist Karl-Heinz Ott, the result is a devilishly comic machine that picks apart nearly every taboo that allows modern society to function.


Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner is the inspiration for this solo show, but co-writers Matthew Spangler and Benjamin Evett so greatly expanded the world and character of the poem’s unnamed narrator that it’s hardly fair to call this theater piece an adaptation. Given the linguistically rich text, Evett’s virtuoso performance, and the magic director Rick Lombardo’s worked with the myriad design elements, there was no question when I saw Albatross at the Paramount Center in January that it would make my best list for the year. The production was restaged in May at New Rep.

* **Dying City** by Christopher Shinn. Directed by Cameron Cronin. Staged by the Happy Medium Theatre

It’s no secret that I am not a fan of the current fashion for the two-handers presented in a naturalistic style. Yes, the budget is low; but economic limitations often translate into imaginative limitations. However, in rare instances, dramatists make brilliant use of these constraints. Christopher Shinn’s play isn’t just a yarn about the widow of a U.S. Army reserve officer in Iraq and his twin brother mourning the soldier’s death. It is a psychologically complex battle among three cagey individuals: an actor, a psychotherapist, and a doctoral candidate in literature. The trio are constantly strategizing about how to uncover truths that the others are hiding; at the same time it also addresses America’s continuing ambivalence towards the Iraq War.

After the unanticipated closing of the South End’s Factory Theater in late 2014, a number of Boston’s fringe companies, who had already scheduled performances in the space, were left in the lurch. Some canceled their shows, others scrambled to find a new space. Luckily, Happy Medium Theatre was determined, and staged this intense drama in the intimate environment of the kitchen and living room of actors Kiki Samko and Michael Underwood’s Jamaica Plain apartment.


Double Edge Theatre Ensemble has evolved such an expansive vision of theater that this show filled the hefty tract of farmland where they reside (and perform) in Ashfield, MA. This past summer the company transformed the farm into a South American town on the verge of being changed beyond recognition by a dam construction project. The town of Agua Santa is populated by a cast of eccentric characters, some clever, some misguided, some foolish, some ribald, and some morbid. A visit to the hamlet yielded philosophical and political meditations on being and becoming, individuality and community. Overshadowing the pastoral/speculative dramatics was the relentless intrusion of modernity and capital. The acting ensemble and the corps of designers created a magical realist spectacle that dazzled the senses without ever lapsing into the superficial. Director Stacy Klein masterfully orchestrated every sound and movement. Those who missed Once a Blue Moon will have an opportunity to see it when Double Edge remounts the production this summer. There is talk that the company may create a touring version of the show that can be presented in conventional theater spaces. My advice: see it in their home environment.
Broken Glass by Arthur Miller.
Directed by Jim Petosa. Presented by New Repertory Theatre

New Rep had a fairly uneven 2015, but celebrating the centenary of dramatist Arthur Miller inspired a marvelous production of Broken Glass, Miller’s largely neglected late-career play (it was a Boston-area premiere). This Jim Petosa-helmed production had a great cast and fine design sensibilities. Miller’s historical drama explores how the 1938 Kristallnacht pogroms in Germany exerted a profound psychological impact on American Jews living in Brooklyn. The 1994 script is relevant, and not just because of the persistence of anti-Semitism. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are still going on today — as they were when this play premiered. Productions of engaged dramas like this suggest that theater can play a vital role in American cultural discourse — as it does in other countries.

Ian Thal is a playwright, performer, and theater educator specializing in mime, commedia dell’arte, and puppetry, and has been known to act on Boston area stages from time to time, sometimes with Teatro delle Maschere. He has performed his one-man show, Arlecchino Am Ravenous, in numerous venues in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. One of his as-of-yet unproduced full-length plays was picketed by a Hamas supporter during a staged reading. He is looking for a home for his latest play, The Conversos of Venice, which is a thematic deconstruction of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice. Formerly the community editor at The Jewish Advocate, he blogs irregularly at the unimaginatively entitled The Journals of Ian Thal, and writes the “Nothing But Trouble” column for The Clyde Fitch Report.